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The Truman Capote nonfiction novel, "In Cold Blood," which reflects for adolescents the immediacy of the real world, illuminates (1) social issues--capital punishment, environmental influence, and the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots," (2) moral issues--the complexity of man's nature, the responsibility of one man for another, and the place of values in today's society, and (3) literary issues--catharsis and identification in the classic tragic mode, the uses of images and point of view, plot structure, and the creation of suspense despite the reader's foreknowledge of events in the novel. (Discussion questions for 12th-grade English classes are included.) (JB)

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6 **Feedback**

8 **Dilemmas of a Tween-Age Teacher**
by John M. Culkin, S.J. Things that blow up in the communications explosion—and how to put them back together. ..... *TEACHING*

12 **Teaching In Cold Blood**
by Joan Berbrich Capote's Classic in the classroom *PAPERBACKS*

16 **How to Manufacture Tin Ears**
by John Rouse If traditional grammar *and* linguistics are thrown out, what's left? ..... *TEACHING*

21 **The Summa Award: Nobody Waved Goodbye** ..... *KUDOS*

22 **The Nits in Darwin's Beard**
by Allan Harrison Science is not a "happening." Modern learning has a history inhabited by real people. ..... *PAPERBACKS*

28 **Bravo Fordham!**
A report on the Fordham (vs. Boredom) Film Conference ... *FILM*

30 **Teaching The 400 Blows**
by Frank McLaughlin ..... *FILM*

32 **So . . . What's Special About TV This Season?**
by Ned Hoopes ..... *TELEVISION*

35 **Telelog**

37 **Jack and Jill: A Close Reading**
by Arthur Daigon ..... *HUMOR*

39 **Recommended Shorts: The Summer Crop**
by William J. Sloan ..... *FILM*

44 **Newsworthy Paperbacks**
by Frank Ross ..... *PAPERBACKS*

46 **Reprints Available**

47 **Earsight: A Column of Sound Observations**
by Tony Schwartz ..... *TAPES*

48 **Teacher Feature: To Sir, With Love**
by Barry Robinson ..... *FILM*

COVER The N.Y. Public Library Picture Collection yielded this pre-Dewey beauty: An Irish Schoolmaster by J. S. Davis

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Teaching

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Columbia Pictures IN COLD BLOOD

by Joan D. Berbrich

"WHY TEACH *In Cold Blood?*" a parent asked hotly. "It isn't 'literature'."

No, I suppose it isn't 'literature' . . . but it is exciting contemporary writing. It is stylistically interesting. It illustrates artistic structuring of factual materials. It provides a basis for discussion—on capital punishment, on environmental influences, on the haves and the have-nots. It suggests a reason for the present overwhelming popularity of non-fiction. It even parallels an almost forgotten aspect of Greek tragedy. These are the major reasons we teach Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in our senior classes.

In Cold Blood should be read quickly. Capote suggested that one read parts one and two, put the book away for a day, then read the last two parts.[1] Certainly the reading and discussion combined should not extend beyond a two-week period. When the book is brought into the classroom, it is already familiar to almost every student. Though few have read it, all have heard about it. Almost all know about the Clutter murders. They even know the outcome. Yet, they find in the novel suspense and drama. They gain some of the satisfaction, some of the catharsis, Greek audiences must have experienced when they watched the Agamemnon story unfold in the amphitheatre. Those spectators, 2500 years ago, knew that Agamemnon would be slain, that Orestes would, in retaliation, kill his mother, that Orestes would then be pursued by avenging Furies.

Today's seniors know that the Clutters will be murdered, that the killers will be pursued, that they will be captured, tried, and executed. In both cases, the foreknowledge heightens appreciation. The reader of *In Cold Blood* knows Hickock and Smith will be caught, but the reader, too, is caught in an emotional labyrinth. He wants justice. He feels pity for men distorted by the human condition. He experiences (but often refuses to admit) sympathy for the pursued. In the Aeschylus trilogy, Orestes is purged at the Delphic shrine and emerges absolved. In *In Cold Blood* Smith and Hickock are purged at the gallows, and they emerge, not absolved, but understood. For Man, along with these two men, was indicted, and the general indictment restores humanity to the two who had forfeited it.

High school seniors are old enough to understand that *humanity* encompasses man's vicious impulses as well as his divine-like compassion. They do not grow mawkish or sentimental about the two killers. From a reading of the novel, however, they do become more aware of the complexity of man, of the

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responsibility of one man for another, of the close and confused tie that binds all men. Cain's fatal retort, "Am I my brother's keeper?" acquires new and terrifying significance.

The general discussion that follows the reading of this novel should be provocative and thoughtful. It should cause some discomfort to our "safe" seniors; it should bring into the classroom a weighing of values and the place of values in society; it should end in questions, not in answers, for this generation is only beginning to know what questions to ask.

SPRINGBOARDS FOR DISCUSSION

1. CAPOTE HIMSELF implied that the title, *In Cold Blood*, has two interpretations.[2] Is official execution murder? Can the title be justly applied to both the killing of the Clutters and the execution of Hickock and Smith?
2. CAPOTE ALTERNATES chapters about the Clutters with chapters about Hickock and Smith. This constant change of subject at first irritates young readers. Why then does the author use this technique? Does the domestic tranquillity of the Clutter home emphasize the disordered, meaningless lives of Hickock and Smith?
3. THE MOST VIVID image in this novel is Smith's giant yellow parrot that, at regular intervals, swooped down, slaughtered Smith's enemies and winged him away to paradise. Capote uses this image on pages 110, 141, 299 and 357.* What is the significance of this image? Is it effective?
4. THE AUTHOR frequently uses words in combinations that startle and disturb. Note the following: *like a peacock trapped in a turkey pen* (p. 135); *hip-high, sheep-slaughtering snows* (p. 21); *land winter-stripped and as somber as sheet iron* (p. 199); paws used *as though they are surgical instruments* (p. 278). The words themselves are not unusual; the combinations are. Why? Incongruity? Alliteration? Connotation of violence?
5. POINT OF VIEW shifts throughout this novel. Sometimes we witness a scene through Nancy's eyes, sometimes through Smith's, sometimes through a law-officer's. At other times the omniscient author takes over. Is this variation effective? Why?
6. CAPOTE CALLED *In Cold Blood* a non-fiction novel. What does this mean? The non-fiction is obvious. Do the techniques mentioned above suggest a reason for calling this particular non-fiction book a *novel*?
7. AFTER THE CLUTTER murders, the town's people look at each other with new suspicion. Friends of many years distrust each other. People lock and bolt their doors for the first time in their lives. What does murder—indeed, any crime—do to the bystanders, to those not directly involved? What does this suggest about human nature?
8. THE M'NAGHTEN RULE plays an important part in the conviction of Hickock and Smith. What is the *legal* definition of insanity? Is it realistic? Is it moral? What new problems would arise for the courts and for society if insanity were more loosely defined?
9. COINCIDENCE IS something we expect in fiction but suspect in real life. Several incredible coincidences are described in *In Cold Blood*. The day before he was killed,

IN COLD BLOOD: THE FILM

Richard Brooks, best known for his work in *The Professionals* and *Elmer Gantry*, is directing a film version of Capote's book for Columbia Pictures. In a attempt to preserve the impact of the non-fiction novel Brooks is shooting in actual locations and has casted players more for their similarities to the killers, Clutters, *et. al.*, than for their box-office draw.

1. Haskel Frankel, "The Author," *Saturday Review*, January 22, 1966, p. 37.
2. In an interview granted to George Plimpton, reprinted in *The New York Times Book Review*, January 16, 1966, p. 39.

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INFOCARD 8

Herbert Clutter took out a $40,000 life insurance policy, with double indemnity. Dick and Perry were captured in Las Vegas, just moments after Perry picked up a package he had mailed to himself. The package contained two pairs of boots—the boots worn by the killers the night of the murder, the boots that left clear and identifiable footprints at the scene of the crime. These boots provided concrete and incontrovertible evidence. Would a reader accept these coincidences in a regular novel? Are they difficult to accept in this non-fiction novel? Are coincidences as rare in life as we like to pretend?

10. The critic, George Plimpton, said that the final scene in the book seems to synthesize the whole experience for Alvin Dewey.[3] What does this mean? Does this help to explain why *In Cold Blood* may, indeed, be called a non-fiction novel?

The above discussion should lead step-by-step to the final question. Why is non-fiction or the non-fiction novel so popular today? Seventeen-year-olds, pragmatic and down-to-earth, will find the answer quickly. *This* is the real world—a crazy patchquilt of violence and nuclear war, of space conquests and medical miracles, of hasty beginnings and imminent endings. In such a world as this, what novelist can hope to equal the simple words of a working astronaut? What dramatist can hope to create a tragedy as poignant as television's announcement that Friday in November, 1963?

We are living in a world of out-sized figures and out-sized events. We are busy trying to comprehend, to assimilate, to make sense of, these figures and these events. Perhaps this is why a Truman Capote turns from imaginative fiction to a non-fiction novel. Perhaps this is why *In Cold Blood* has an immediacy, a significance that negates the question—"But is it 'literature'?"

3. Plimpton interview, p. 43.

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